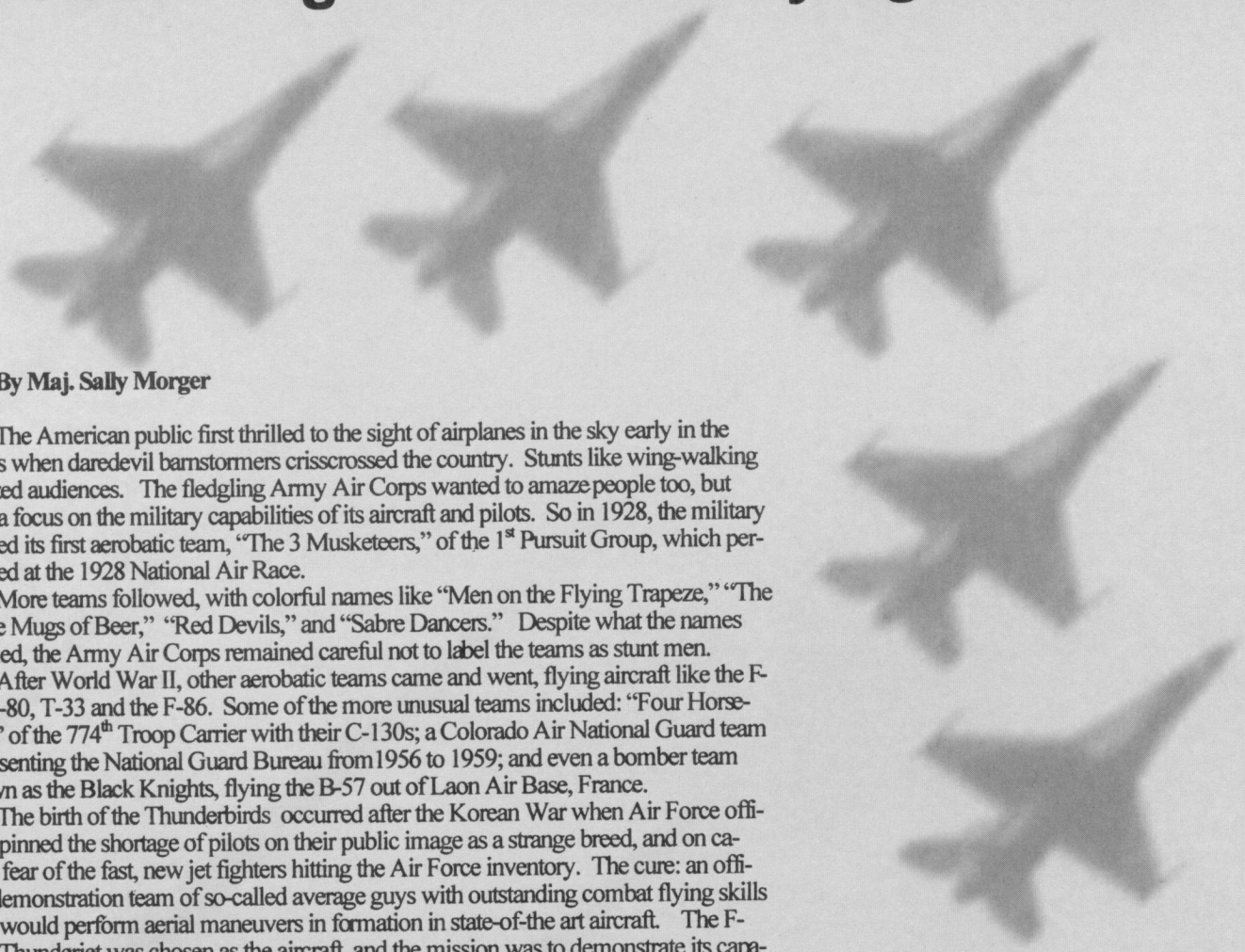
The amazing men in their flying machines



By Maj. Sally Morger

The American public first thrilled to the sight of airplanes in the sky early in the 1900s when daredevil barnstormers crisscrossed the country. Stunts like wing-walking amazed audiences. The fledgling Army Air Corps wanted to amaze people too, but with a focus on the military capabilities of its aircraft and pilots. So in 1928, the military formed its first aerobatic team, "The 3 Musketeers," of the 1st Pursuit Group, which performed at the 1928 National Air Race.

More teams followed, with colorful names like "Men on the Flying Trapeze," "The Three Mugs of Beer," "Red Devils," and "Sabre Dancers." Despite what the names implied, the Army Air Corps remained careful not to label the teams as stunt men.

After World War II, other aerobatic teams came and went, flying aircraft like the F-51, F-80, T-33 and the F-86. Some of the more unusual teams included: "Four Horsemen" of the 774th Troop Carrier with their C-130s; a Colorado Air National Guard team representing the National Guard Bureau from 1956 to 1959; and even a bomber team known as the Black Knights, flying the B-57 out of Laon Air Base, France.

The birth of the Thunderbirds occurred after the Korean War when Air Force officials pinned the shortage of pilots on their public image as a strange breed, and on cadets' fear of the fast, new jet fighters hitting the Air Force inventory. The cure: an official demonstration team of so-called average guys with outstanding combat flying skills who would perform aerial maneuvers in formation in state-of-the art aircraft. The F-84G Thunderjet was chosen as the aircraft, and the mission was to demonstrate its capabilities and to recruit aviation cadets.

The missions have changed since 1928 but the wonderment of the audiences who watch the amazing men in their flying machines lives on.

Thunderbird coverage from previous page...

away from family. "It's tough on a marriage," says lead solo pilot, Maj. Dean Wright. "You know going in that it's going to be stressful." He copes by paying to have his wife Andy and 20-month-old son Jack fly to every airshow site possible. "Jack's been on 43 flights already," Wright said.

The Thunderbirds accommodate special family circumstances when possible. In fact, only five aircraft, instead of the usual six, flew to Westover because one pilot returned home to Nellis AFB, Nev., for the imminent birth of his first child.

The Thunderbirds date to 1953 when the Air Force established the 3600th Air Demonstration Flight at Luke AFB, Ariz. There, officials conducted a contest to pick the name of the team, and 25 percent of the entries suggested the "Thunderbirds."

Among Native American tribes, the Thunderbird holds an equivalent rank of Sun God or Earthmaker and brings victory in war, good over evil, and light over darkness. However, the name was thought to be too common in the Phoenix area, so for the first few weeks of their existence, the team was called the "Stardusters."

Currently, eight pilots, four support officers, four civilians, 104 active duty enlisted people and two National Guardsmen serve with the Thunderbirds, performing in more than 27 different career fields. Of course, most visible to the public are the pilots, who fly specific positions in the air as well as duties beyond performing. In fact, according to team narrator and advance man, Maj. Ken "Fast Eddy" Edwards, each pilot is recruited based on how he fits a specific job. For instance, he explains, the lead pilot is the squadron commander, the left wingman the safety officer, the right wingman the safety officer, the slot man the flight evaluator, and so on.

Those pilots add a lot more hours to their log once assigned to the team, thanks to the grueling schedule and the practice time required. But as Wright says, "I enjoy flying the way no other pilot could ever do."